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**Gentlemen, Heroes, Real Men, Disabled Men: Explorations at the  
Intersections of Disability and Masculinity in Contemporary China\***

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**Abstract**

This article advances new perspectives on disability culture in contemporary China. Using gender – specifically masculinity – as an “intersection,” it addresses key questions that both help to explain, but also further trouble, the way in which the “impaired” male body is both represented and lived in China today. Although recent research across the disciplines is revealing more and more about pre-modern and contemporary understandings of, and responses to, disability in China, little is known about the way in which gendered identities intersect and interact with disabled identities. From “gentlemen” and “heroes” to “real men” and “disabled men,” this article examines dominant historical and contemporary images of masculinity and disability, and illustrates how they have come to frame the way in which disabled men have been viewed and view themselves. And, through the close reading of the

memoirs of one young man, Zhang Yuncheng, it reveals the possibilities and limitations through which gendered behaviors are formed and enacted on an individual level when set against Chinese discourses of disability, normalcy, and gender.

## Keywords

disability – masculinity – normalcy – identity – *nanzihan*

## Introduction

The opening credits of Hunan Television's reality series *Takes a Real Man* (*Zhenzheng nanzihan* 真正男子漢) appear to reflect the extremes, but also complexities, of the discourses of masculinity, maleness, and manhood in China today.<sup>1</sup> Six celebrities of varying ages, military experience, and physical fitness are taken to live and train with the People's Liberation Army, with often comical results. In the opening credits, we are bombarded with images of strength,

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<sup>1</sup> The opening episode of the 2015 series is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qk03qyFhSv0> (last accessed 22 June 2016). A more literal translation of the programme title would be *Real Men*.

grit, and endurance; the eponymous “real men” (*nanzihan*)<sup>2</sup> pose with guns as munitions explode in a riot of light and noise around them. Yet, almost immediately, the “real” men behind these images are revealed – the family man who wants to set an example for his children, the fitness fanatic who appears henpecked by his wife, the middle-aged dog lover, the over-eager teenager, the cool dude, and the out-of-shape bumbler who is clearly not ready for the challenges ahead. “Real” men, it seems, come in all shapes and sizes in contemporary China. But, reality television aside, where do disabled men figure in this wide-ranging gendered landscape? Can disabled men be “real men” here, or does their disability limit, or even preclude them, from such consideration?

From “gentlemen” and “heroes” to “real men” and “disabled men,” this article identifies dominant historical and contemporary images of masculinity and disability, and illustrates how these identity structures have interacted and intersected to frame broader social understandings of what are considered “appropriate” behaviors for disabled men in China today. Through an examination of the memoirs of one young man – Zhang Yuncheng 張雲成 (b.1980), who has muscular dystrophy and, like the participants of *Takes a Real Man*, is something of a celebrity in China – the article then proceeds to interrogate these assumptions to highlight sites of potential connection and rupture with lived experience.<sup>3</sup> My analysis of

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<sup>2</sup> *Nanzihan* is often provided as the Chinese equivalent to a “masculine” man, one who “has the qualities or appearance considered to be typical of men”; see A.S. Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition (Beijing: Commercial Press; Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1070. For the Chinese definition of *nanzihan*, see Luo Zhufeng 羅竹風, ed., *Hanyu da cidian: zhong juan* 漢語大詞典: 中卷 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji yinshuachang, 2002), 4620.

<sup>3</sup> My turn to life writing here is very much informed by the suggestion that, as disabled masculinity is ultimately experienced at a personal level, research that either explicitly or implicitly investigates how individual disabled

Zhang's memoirs – *Three Days to Walk* (*Jiaru wo neng xingzou san tian* 假如我能行走三天; published 2003)<sup>4</sup> and *Flying without Wings* (*Huan yi zhong fangshi feixing* 換一種方式飛行; published 2012)<sup>5</sup> – reveals various, and hitherto unknown, strategies used by disabled men to counter or compensate for negative perceptions and stereotypes of disability as they negotiate their way through a society permeated with ableist norms and patriarchal expectations of manhood.<sup>6</sup>

Drawing such a nuanced picture of disabled masculinity is, however, a complex affair. To begin with, it is very difficult to pin down the qualities of what might make a “real man” in China, even more so when we know that the notion of what makes a “man” in any culture is in constant flux. Masculinity is commonly defined in English as an “assemblage of qualities regarded as characteristic of men,”<sup>7</sup> and the extent to which an individual meets the gendered

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men with different forms of impairment experience masculinity in their everyday lives offers a more nuanced and dynamic view than more generic conceptualizations; see Russell Shuttleworth, Nikki Wedgwood, and Nathan J. Wilson, “The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity,” *Men and Masculinities* 15.2 (2012): 174-194.

<sup>4</sup> This study uses the re-published version from 2008 – Zhang Yuncheng 張雲成, *Jiaru wo neng xingzou santian* 假如我能行走三天 (Jialin: Lijiang chubanshe, 2008). Hereafter, *Three Days*.

<sup>5</sup> Zhang Yuncheng 張雲成, *Huan yi zhong fangshi feixing* 換一種方式飛行 (Chengdu: Sichuan wenyi chubanshe, 2012). A more literal translation would be *Another Way to Fly*. Hereafter, *Flying*.

<sup>6</sup> In doing so, I aim to add further detail to our growing understanding of disability in China more broadly. For an annotated bibliography of some of the key studies in this exciting new field, see Sarah Dauncey, “Disability Studies,” in Tim Wright, ed., *Oxford Bibliographies Online--Chinese Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), available online at <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0132.xml> (last accessed 03 October 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of English* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1079.

assumptions about what constitutes maleness or masculinity has been shown to be a key part of socialization in many cultures. However, we also know that notions of what makes a “man” – whether that is in terms of physical characteristics and behaviors, or whether it is in terms of social roles and responsibilities – can change dramatically across historical time and geographical space. Because of this, Western understandings of masculinity that have historically drawn upon notions of physical strength and virility may find themselves in direct contrast to local understandings of “manliness” in cultural systems that place greater value on other symbols of male status and hierarchy.<sup>8</sup> Geng Song suggests that this has been particularly problematic in China where the internalization of dominant Western notions of masculinity has resulted in something akin to a “crisis of masculinity.” Rather than being judged against traditional Chinese notions of masculinity that favour social status (either through success in education or work) and familial responsibility (through supporting elderly relatives and providing children to carry on the family line), Chinese men, he argues, have been “judged against the myth of the Western macho heroes by the Western standards and are thus labelled effeminate.”<sup>9</sup> Tiantian Zheng illustrates how this “crisis” has come to spawn a fully blown “anti-feminized men discourse” where the non-masculine man is transformed into “a trope denoting a nation-state in danger because of a dysfunctional Chinese

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<sup>8</sup> Kimberly Kay Hoang’s study of Western and Vietnamese businessmen, for example, demonstrates the way in which these different groups simultaneously affirm and contest Western superiority; see Kimberly Kay Hoang, “Flirting with Capital: Negotiating Perceptions of Pan-Asian Ascendancy and Western Decline in Global Sex Work,” *Social Problems* 61.4 (2014): 507–529.

<sup>9</sup> Geng Song, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 10.

manhood.”<sup>10</sup> The publication in 2016 of “Little Men” (*Xiaoxiao nanzihan* 小小男子漢) – a new primary school textbook in which young boys are encouraged to develop such “manly” attributes as bravery, loyalty, and resilience, alongside a sense of social responsibility, a desire to protect the environment, and an appropriate degree of financial acumen – appears to reflect this desire to nurture a new type of Chinese manhood, one that is capable of responding to the threat posed by hegemonic stereotypes of masculinity originating outside China.<sup>11</sup>

Recognizing a diversity in masculinities both across and within different cultures in such a way is clearly necessary. Yet, as Raewyn Connell, has pointed out, it might not be enough, particularly when there is evidence of multiple, competing masculinities. “We must recognize,” she argues, “the *relations* between the different kinds of masculinity: reliance, dominance and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on.”<sup>12</sup> Such observations on the nature of hegemonic masculinities find particularly relevance here for, as soon as we come to inject understandings of disability into our existing assumptions, we discover even more striking tensions and contradictions, many of which seem difficult to reconcile. “Having a disability,” write Adrienne Asch and Michelle Fine, is often seen as “synonymous with being dependent,

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<sup>10</sup> Tiantian Zheng, “Masculinity in Crisis: Effeminate Men, Loss of Manhood, and the Nation-state in Postsocialist China,” *Etnográfica* 19.2 (2015): 347-365, see p.353. Projected anxieties over China’s colonial past and national vulnerability *vis-à-vis* “stronger” foreign forces, past and present, appear to play a significant role here.

<sup>11</sup> *Xiaoxiao nanzihan* 小小男子漢 (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 37.

childlike, and helpless.”<sup>13</sup> And, as I have shown elsewhere, this stereotype of passivity and dependence certainly resonates strongly in China where disabled people are known to hide their impairments, or are reluctant to “come out” as a disabled person, for fear of prejudice and discrimination on just such grounds.<sup>14</sup> Dominant images of disability that view the impaired body as weak, deficient, and useless offer a fundamental challenge to all that is embodied in many hegemonic visions of the ideal male. Most of these visions, as we will see, rest heavily on notions of the able body, whether that is physically strong and virile, or whether it is productive and successful in terms of education, work, finance, or procreation.

Herein lies what Russell Shuttleworth, Nikki Wedgewood, and Nathan J. Wilson have termed the “dilemma of disabled masculinity” – the fact that men with disabilities are obliged to respond to hegemonic, able-bodied ideals of masculinity despite the fact that this may well place them in conflict with their marginalized status.<sup>15</sup> How this “dilemma” plays out in a situation where there may be multiple, overlapping hegemonic ideals – as appears to be the cases in China where disability must intersect with a Chinese masculinity already in crisis – however, is less clear. This article sets out to probe, then, these peculiar tensions and conflicts to reveal, for the first time, the standards and traditions against which the perceived “effeminacy” of Chinese disabled men might be calibrated or understood. It then goes further to demonstrate the possibilities and limitations through which masculine behaviors are

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<sup>13</sup> Adrienne Asch and Michelle Fine, “Introduction: Beyond Pedestals,” in Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch, eds., *Women with Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture, and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 1-7, see p.3.

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Dauncey, “A Face in the Crowd: Imagining Individual and Collective Disabled Identities in Contemporary China,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 25.2 (2013): 130-165.

<sup>15</sup> Shuttleworth, Wedgewood, and Wilson, “The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity.”

formed and enacted on an individual level when set against these dominant discourses of disability, normalcy, and gender. In doing so, the article illustrates the importance of acknowledging both local *and* global influences on the construction of a gendered, disabled identity. Such an approach offers much-needed nuance to the more ubiquitous universalist conceptions, which often only seem to take us part way in explaining how such identities are constructed and negotiated beyond the Western context.

### **Intersecting Disability and Gender**

Until recently, very little was understood about the way in which disability affects the gendering process, and one of the reasons for this was the overwhelming focus on understanding disabled people almost exclusively in relation to non-disabled people.<sup>16</sup> This is now changing, however, as scholars turn to investigate the diverse ways in which disability is experienced, and how disabled identities are created and negotiated in a wide variety of social and cultural contexts around the world. As far as China is concerned, perhaps the most ground-breaking work to date has been done by Matthew Kohrman, whose ethnographic study provided the first examination of the experiences of a very active group of disabled men in Beijing against the background of disability's rapid politicization in the early decades of reform.<sup>17</sup> Kohrman's work (discussed in more detail later) contributes much to our understanding of how these particular men, at this particular point in time, responded to the social and political pressures surrounding them. His findings suggest that, for men in Beijing

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<sup>16</sup> Karen E. Peters and Karin Opacich, "Gender," in Gary L. Albrecht, ed., *Encyclopedia of Disability*, Volume 2 (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Inc., 2006), 760-764, see p. 762.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Kohrman, *Bodies of Difference: Experiences of Disability and Institutional Advocacy in the Making of Modern China* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005).



in the 1990s, having a disability was clearly disadvantageous in the marriage market because they failed to meet up to local, competence-based expectations of what made a *nanzihan* or “real man.”<sup>18</sup>

While Kohrman’s study offers the first valuable empirical evidence as to the potential complexity of the way in which gender and disability might interact in the modern era, it continues to be the only exploration of its kind to date. For this reason, if we are to more fully conceptualize “disabled masculinities” in more recent times in China, we should also consider the potential contribution of theoretical approaches developed elsewhere. “Intersectionality” – or examining the way in which different categories of identity interact on various levels – is one such approach that has come to the fore in recent years to offer up a new way of viewing disability through multiple disciplinary lenses and, more importantly, explicate it along multiple social axes. It has been known for some time, of course, that categories such as gender, race, class or sexuality, for example, “are not distinct realms of experiences, existing in splendid isolation from each other; they come into existence in and through relations to each other,”<sup>19</sup> but through an intersectional approach we can begin to see more clearly not only how identity structures such as gender and disability are mutually constitutive and interdependent, but also how these structures become dynamic and polysemic as a result.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Kohrman, *Bodies of Difference*, chapter 6. This chapter is based on an earlier article, which will be cited hereafter due to its lengthier exposition: see Matthew Kohrman, “Grooming Que Zi: Marriage Exclusion and Identity Formation among Disabled Men in Contemporary China,” *American Ethnologist* 26.4 (1999): 890-909.

<sup>19</sup> Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

<sup>20</sup> For an exploration of intersectionality as an approach to understanding gendered behaviors, see Ahir Gopaldas and Eileen Fischer, “Beyond Gender: Intersectionality, Culture, and Consumer Behavior,” in Cele C. Otnes and Linda Tuncay Zayer, eds., *Gender, Culture, and Consumer Behavior* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 393-410.

How, then, might we start to theorize these potential spaces of intersection between disability and gender? This is an interesting question for, as we know from the substantial body of disability studies literature, disabled people in many different cultures are often represented as “*without gender*, as *asexual* creatures, as freaks of nature, as monstrous, the ‘Other’ to the social norm. In this way,” writes Helen Meekosha, “it may be assumed that for disabled people gender has little bearing.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, research has also shown us quite clearly that experiences of disability may actually be *intensified* by gender. For women, this might manifest itself as “a sense of intensified passivity and helplessness”; for men, by contrast, “a corrupted masculinity generated by enforced dependence.” What is more, Meekosha continues, is that such perceptions of disabled men and women “have real consequences in terms of education, employment, living arrangements, and personal relationships, victimization and abuse that then in turn reinforce the images in the public sphere.”<sup>22</sup> For these very reasons, argue Karen E. Peters and Karin Opacich, it is important that we view disability and disabled identities from the dichotomies of both disabled/non-disabled *and* men/women.<sup>23</sup>

The process of identity formation is undeniably complex and, in the case of disability, research has shown the process to be even more convoluted. According to Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, in order to “enact” gender, men and women (disabled or otherwise) must be recognized by others as “appropriately” masculine or feminine or they risk being “called to account.”<sup>24</sup> What is deemed “appropriately” masculine or feminine in many cultures, however,

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<sup>21</sup> Helen Meekosha, “Gender, International,” in Gary L. Albrecht, ed., *Encyclopedia of Disability*, Volume 2 (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Inc., 2006), 764-769, see p.765. Emphasis original.

<sup>22</sup> Meekosha, “Gender, International,” 765.

<sup>23</sup> Peters and Opacich, “Gender,” 760.

<sup>24</sup> Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender & Society* 1.2 (1987): 125-151.

is known to be guided almost exclusively by “the hierarchies of value in the able-bodied world,” and these tend to stigmatize bodily difference.<sup>25</sup> This immediately throws up something of a paradox. In the process of identity formation, gendered role expectations and influences from family, peers, and society combine with hegemonic understandings of bodily difference to result in a situation whereby disabled people are often expected to conform to the gendered assumptions of the able-bodied world in which they inhabit. However, it is often then the case that they are ultimately *denied* full participation in that gendered, able-bodied world because of their disability. A pertinent example of this in China (discussed in more detail later) is the way in which eugenicist policies from the early twentieth century on have actively discouraged disabled people from marrying and having children in a culture that, all the while, has traditionally viewed the family as one of the cornerstones of society and sees marriage as the basis for ideal gendered relations.

Having said all of this, it is also known that not all disabled men and women are passive in their acceptance of this contradictory state of affairs. Many scholars have noted the way in which disabled men and women often adopt strategies to cope with the discrimination and stigma they experience. For some, this may mean adopting behaviors that are hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine; for others who find themselves unable to express themselves in “appropriately” feminine or masculine modes of conduct, this may mean redefining femininity or masculinity, or even rejecting them completely. Such responses have been shown to allow the individuals concerned to meet, or indeed deflect, the gendered expectations of those around them and society at large. Thomas J. Gerschick and Adam Stephen Miller go further to propose a tri-part typology of relational responses to hegemonic

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<sup>25</sup> Meekosha, “Gender, International,” 766.

masculinity – *reliance* (whereby men internalize or continue to rely upon on hegemonic masculine ideals), *reformulation* (whereby men reformulate or rebalance these ideals in line with their own individual capacities and limitations), and *rejection* (whereby men reject these ideals to formulate their own alternative masculinities).<sup>26</sup> In terms of specific responses, these could come, respectively, in the form of participation in physically demanding activities,<sup>27</sup> a greater focus on financial autonomy or work-based success, or the creation of an identity that is founded upon personhood rather than gender roles. Gerschick and Miller also found, however, that individual responses did not fall exclusively into one pattern or another – “for heuristic reasons,” they suggest, “it is best to speak of the major and minor ways each man uses these three patterns.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Masculinity in a Changing China**

The various studies discussed so far concur that social assumptions regarding the expectations and behavior of disabled men, and any personal responses to such assumptions, are both dynamic and context-specific; but, they also strongly suggest that such personal responses are not necessarily straightforward, neither are they risk-free. In order to ascertain,

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas J. Gerschick and Adam Stephen Miller, “Gender Identities at the Crossroads of Masculinity and Physical Disability,” in Mary M. Gergen and Sara N. Davis, eds., *Toward a New Psychology of Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 455-475.

<sup>27</sup> This is frequently described as “overcompensation” and is often referred to negatively as the “supercrip” or “superhuman” phenomenon. Yet, it can be both an empowering and disempowering experience; see Ronald J. Berger, “Disability and the Dedicated Wheelchair Athlete: Beyond the ‘Supercrip’ Critique,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 37.6 (2008): 647-678.

<sup>28</sup> Gerschick and Miller, “Gender Identities,” 457.

therefore, the extent to which such understandings of the intersection of disability and masculinity are useful as we move towards examining China, we first need to identify the major cultural influences that have shaped the way in which masculinity and disability have been conceived and negotiated in China, both historically and in more recent times. The influence of China's patriarchal family system is an obvious starting point. In view of the fact that it has been much studied elsewhere (not least on multiple occasions in *Nan Nǚ*), there is no need to go into much depth here, suffice to say that sons (in contrast to daughters) were considered permanent members of their natal family and, as such, were expected to contribute economically, to provide sons to further the family line, and to look after their parents in old age.<sup>29</sup> The outside world, the world of work and office, was traditionally viewed as the male sphere; the home, an inner sphere for women and child-rearing. Although we now know that these boundaries were often much more fluid and dynamic than is generally portrayed in didactic texts and images,<sup>30</sup> and that burgeoning gender anxiety in the late imperial period played a significant role in shaping new socio-legal responses to perceived transgressions of these boundaries,<sup>31</sup> these *idealistic* gender roles and expectations were

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<sup>29</sup> Demographic studies reveal that socio-economic status was, relatively speaking, more significant for men in the late imperial period; see Ted A. Telford, "Covariates of Men's Age at First Marriage: The Historical Demography of Chinese Lineages," *Population Studies* 46.1 (1992): 19-35.

<sup>30</sup> Classic studies in this regard include Charlotte Furth, "Androgynous Males and Deficient Females: Biology and Gender Boundaries in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century China," *Late Imperial China* 9.2 (1988): 1-31; Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Susan Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Matthew Harvey Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

sufficiently imbedded to last well into the twentieth century despite many of the advances in gender equality over that time.<sup>32</sup> What is also of note is that, while patriarchal attitudes may be gradually disappearing from the urban landscape, this is not necessarily true for rural or migrant communities where the gendered division of labor continues to dominate in practice for a wide variety of reasons even though residents are increasingly aware of the concept of gender equality in theory.<sup>33</sup> All of this suggests that we should pay attention to the possible continued influence of traditional gender roles and expectations, as well as the potential impact of a rural or urban identity (or indeed what might happen when transitioning between the two).

While stereotypical notions of appropriate male social and economic roles *vis-à-vis* women provide one way of understanding what it might mean to be a “real man” in China, it is also perhaps useful to look at ways in which masculinity has been understood beyond purely role-based factors. One of the more interesting recent theoretical discussions that has supported the development of a more indigenous framing of masculinity has been proposed by Kam Louie. Rejecting Western paradigms of masculinity – like Song, he argues that their application would only prove that Chinese men are “not quite real men” because they fail

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<sup>32</sup> Key studies here include: Susan Greenhalgh, “Sexual Stratification: The Other Side of ‘Growth with Equity’ in East Asia,” *Population and Development Review* 11.2 (1985): 265-314; Harriet Evans, “Defining Difference: The ‘Scientific’ Construction of Sexuality and Gender in the People’s Republic of China,” *Signs* 20.2 (1995): 357-394; Barbara Entwisle and Gail E. Henderson, eds., *Re-drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Emily Hannum, Peggy Kong, and Yuping Zhang, “Family Sources of Educational Gender Inequality in Rural China: A Critical Assessment,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 29.5 (2009): 474-486; C. Cindy Fan, “Rural-urban Migration and Gender Division of Labor in Transitional China,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27.1 (2003): 24-47.

(Western) tests of masculinity – he instead draws on the *wen* 文 (cultural attainment) and *wu* 武 (martial valour) dyad.<sup>34</sup> Under Louie’s framework, we see male literary and historical figures embracing elements of both scholarship and swordsmanship to varying degrees, with the refined and morally pure Confucian gentleman (*junzi* 君子) and courageously loyal but brutish hero (*haohan* 好漢) occupying separate ends of the spectrum, and the talented, romantic scholar (*caizi* 才子) and chivalrous knight-errant (*wuxia* 武俠) traditions falling somewhere in between.<sup>35</sup>

While much of Louie’s analysis is focused on pre-1949, he also attempts to extend his theory to the present:

The nationalist impulse of “training the body for China” and the Communist insistence that able-bodied citizens work for social construction in China [...] has generated idealised images of workers and peasants, whose physical and moral composition is closer to the *wu* heroes than the *wen*. With the advent of the consumer society in the late twentieth century, the traditional predominance of the *wen* over *wu* within the *wen-wu* model is further destabilised. Capitalism is concerned with production and profits. Male ideals are increasingly those imbued with buying power.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> In the *haohan*, argues Song, we probably find the Chinese tradition that most resembles the dominant notion of masculinity in the West; see Song, *The Fragile Scholar*, 163. For further discussion of these images, see also Martin Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*, 161.

This framework is indeed laudable for its attempt to indigenize masculinity, but Louie's study is fundamentally concerned with "traditional" conceptions and does little to reveal the ways in which received home-grown notions of gender, sexuality and bodily difference have been reinforced, or more likely challenged, in more recent times through the transformative processes of opening-up and reform. As Yao Souchou points out in his review of Louie's book, "The formal elegance of the *wen-wu* system gives no hint of the banal, chaotic world of the everyday."<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the most useful understandings of masculinity in the contemporary context have been put forward by Geng Song and Derek Hird in their recent exploration of the social, economic and cultural factors that have affected men, and representations of men, in contemporary China. Through an examination of popular culture and key living and working environments, they illustrate how male identities can be understood as assemblages of discursive norms of masculinity "refracted through the material and corporeal realities of everyday lives" where "each individual creates and contributes his own reworking of Chinese masculinity, however much he professes adherence of received understandings of Chinese male identity."<sup>38</sup> Their study concludes that the model of the middle-class white-collar professional "has become most dominant in shaping the gendered aspirations of ambitious, well-educated young urban men who seek to be associated with prosperity and success."<sup>39</sup> Building on this collaborative work, Hird has further developed these ideas to show how some

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<sup>37</sup> Yao Souchou, "Review of Kam Louie's *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*," *Australian Humanities Review* 27 (2002), available online at <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-September-2002/souchou.html> (last accessed 22 June 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Geng Song and Derek Hird, *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 21.

<sup>39</sup> Song and Hird, *Men and Masculinities*, 150-157.



Chinese young men living in London draw on both historically embedded notions of Chinese masculinity – principally the Confucian gentleman or *junzi* – as well as contemporary global business masculinities to fashion ethical identities for themselves that are distinct in cultural, class and gender terms, and enable them to avoid the spectre that is the “crisis of masculinity”:

[Their] ethical self-makings via the appropriation of the *junzi* ideal are creative and transformative responses to the circumstances they encounter as transnational, well-educated Chinese men; at the same time, their thoughts and actions are necessarily delimited by contemporary discourses and power relations. As educated Chinese men living and working in a Western environment they strive to enact a hegemonic Chinese masculinity against a historical background in which Chinese masculinity has been undermined, challenged and erased. Their reworking of their identity seeks to link their masculinity with Chinese nationhood and culture in ways that thwart the ever-present potential undoing of their manhood.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, while this particular group of men can be understood as drawing upon the tradition of the *junzi* as they assemble their masculine identity in the cosmopolitan world that is London, other men in mainland China have been shown to be drawing upon very different notions of what it makes to be a man. Elanah Uretsky, for example, provides a different example of historical influence in her study of businessmen and the sexual economy in southwest China, in which she argues that, for her subjects at least, the *nanzihan*, the “manly man” or “real man” of the introduction, is a much more significant influence framing assumptions about

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<sup>40</sup> Hird, “Moral Masculinities,” 136.

successful masculinity.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to global paradigms that have frequently associated maleness to a large extent with sexual behavior, Uretsky argues that this more “manly” understanding of Chinese masculinity “is more closely tied to a man’s social and professional status.” This status is heavily dependent upon men engaging in and maintaining clearly compartmentalized relationships both within the home such that they fulfil their traditional filial expectations, as well as outside it such that they attain success in the workplace.<sup>42</sup> This is not to say that virility does not play a role in such a construction (it is clear that her subjects viewed sex outside of marriage as a key part of elite male socialization), but that lineage construction, homosocial networking, and other face-saving indicators – for example, being well-educated (*suzhi gao* 素質高) – that would demonstrate an appropriate level of Chinese civility, were the primary drivers: “The man who has achieved the title of *nanzihan* often reifies this status through the consumption of women, which signifies him as elite. This is not part of his masculine identity but certainly an entitlement that comes along with masculinity in Confucian society.”<sup>43</sup>

What draws these differing examples of masculinity together, however, is the way in which understandings of masculinities in contemporary China often draw upon historical conceptions (the *caizi*, the *junzi*, the *haohan*, and the *nanzihan* included), but equally, may also draw upon other contemporary, non-indigenous identities as and when required. Yet, whether we understand this dynamic appropriation of masculine identities as an “assemblage,” a “hybrid,” a “bricolage,” or a “polyculture” (to name but a few of the terms

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<sup>41</sup> Elanah Uretsky, *Occupational Hazards: Sex, Business, and HIV in Post-Mao China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 54-85.

<sup>42</sup> Uretsky, *Occupational Hazards*, 55.

<sup>43</sup> Uretsky, *Occupational Hazards*, 84-85.

used in current scholarship), it is apparent that the complex and fluid nature of gendered identities is, in part, a result of the conscious and unconscious appropriation of a wide range of sometimes contradictory influences that may be simultaneously historical and contemporary, domestic and foreign.<sup>44</sup>

### **Integrating discourses of masculinity and disability in China**

Understandings of Chinese masculinity are, therefore, moving away from wholly traditional attributes to other iterations that are shaped by the increasingly globalized and capital-driven world of China in the twenty-first century; yet, it is evident that cultural context and socio-economic standpoint are also influential. What is not yet so clear, however, is the way in which the non-normative body fits into these new gendered discourses. Certainly, like gender, traditional philosophical understandings of disability have played a key role in framing understandings of disability and normalcy throughout the imperial period, across the twentieth century and into the present. While Daoist thinking did not regard the individual, physical body (or mind) as normative and rejected exclusionary judgements of difference on this basis, the more socially dominant Confucian thought, by contrast, placed great value on the preservation of the whole and intact physical body. Not only was the literal body itself to be respected (as it had been bequeathed by parents), it was also metaphorically conceived as the public manifestation of self-cultivation. Here, imperfection inferred vulgarity, clumsiness and a lack of cultivation, which in turn reinforced the undesirability of physical or mental

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<sup>44</sup> For a useful overview of the many terms used in this regard, see Sofia Aboim, *Plural Masculinities: The Remaking of the Self in Private Life* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), particularly p.110.

abnormality.<sup>45</sup> And so, while empathy and compassion for those less fortunate formed a fundamental element of Confucian thinking, the primacy of the whole and able body (and mind) resulted in a long-lasting and negative influence on popular and governmental attitudes towards the non-normative body.

Into the twentieth century, colonial and socialist discourses of biomedicine, the rise of global sports, and the imperatives of socialist revolution, played their own part in putting the disabled body into even more stark relief by foregrounding the physical strength – and, in the case of men, masculinity and virility – of the able and active body.<sup>46</sup> The Chinese notion of “human quality” (*suzhi* 素質), which emerged as a result of these many interweaving discourses and can refer to both physical and mental capacity, worked to marginalize and stigmatize the impaired body even further. As early as the 1950s, for example, pre-marital health check-ups were seeing anyone deemed unfit for reproduction advised against or even prevented from marriage and child-bearing, as Harriet Evans elucidates:

Since sexual activity in the 1950s was considered morally and legally acceptable only within the context of marriage, the corollary of this was to deny legitimate

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<sup>45</sup> Andrew Lambert, “Daoism and Disability,” in Darla Y. Schumm and Michael Stolfus, eds., *Disability and World Religions: An Introduction* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 71-92.

<sup>46</sup> For more detail, see Mann, *Gender and Sexuality*, 100; Frank Dikötter, *Imperfect Conceptions: Medical Knowledge, Birth Defects and Eugenics in China* (London: Hurst, 1998); Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

opportunities for sexual relationships to men and women with physical defects that made them unfit for marriage and reproduction.<sup>47</sup>

The developing discourse of disability in the Mao era gradually coalesced into a discourse of “overcoming” – if the disability couldn’t be avoided in the first place (namely through the sterilization, marriage bans or other methods mentioned above), then it had to be overcome in some way. In most cases this was through either rehabilitation (for example, through physiotherapy or the use of aids or prostheses)<sup>48</sup> or cure (for example, through surgery or simply the power of Mao Zedong thought).<sup>49</sup> It could also be achieved through sheer will and intense physical effort, and it was this period that saw the appearance of new phrases – such as “disabled in body but not in spirit” (*ren can zhi bu can* 人殘志不殘) – reflecting the emerging notion that disabled people could become productive members of the new revolutionary society if only they had the “correct” attitude and, more troublingly, just put their backs and minds to it.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Evans, “Defining Difference,” 367. See also Neil J. Diamant, “Making Love ‘Legible’ in China: Politics and Society during the Enforcement of Civil Marriage Registration, 1950–66,” *Politics & Society* 29.3 (2001): 447–480. For more on *suzhi*, see Andrew Kipnis, “*Suzhi*: A Keyword Approach,” *China Quarterly* 186 (2006): 295–313.

<sup>48</sup> Chen offers a fascinating account of the way in which disabled bodies, prostheses, and tools introduced alternative laboring bodily forms to the Maoist political discourse. See Tina Mai Chen, “The Human–Machine Continuum in Maoism: The Intersection of Soviet Socialist Realism, Japanese Theoretical Physics, and Chinese Revolutionary Theory,” *Cultural Critique* 80 (2012): 151–181.

<sup>49</sup> An example of this miraculous “curing” can be found in “Mao Tse-tung’s Thought Opens a New Road to the Curing of Deaf-Mutes,” *China Pictorial* (March 1969): 28.

<sup>50</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these Mao-era developments and the development of Chinese disabled identities across the twentieth century more broadly, see Sarah Dauncey, *Disability in China: Citizenship, Identity and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

From the 1980s onwards, this discourse continued to evolve as new international ideals of equality, pride, and self-worth, most of them drawn directly from United Nations-led human rights initiatives, became incorporated into China's understanding of disability. These ideals were refined further over the following decades by domestically conceived notions of self-reliance, social productivity, and communal responsibility drawn from broader post-reform discourses of neoliberalism, many of which had their roots in the Mao era discourses of productivity and responsibility mentioned previously. While still viewed by the state as a distinct group of vulnerable people who are to be pitied and supported wherever possible (and the state has made considerable efforts here to raise awareness and promote disability work around the country), disabled people are continually encouraged to adopt a spirit of "tireless self-improvement" (*zi qiang bu xi* 自強不息) as part of a move towards greater individualization, responsibilization, and self-realization. What is more, once their ability to fend for themselves (or better still help others) is evidenced through their entrepreneurial or heroic efforts, they are praised as equal and valuable members of society for they are no longer considered a burden on their families, society, or the state.<sup>51</sup> The disabled model hero of socialist times has been recast into a neoliberal superhero for the post-reform era.

This, in effect, is the crystallization of what I have described elsewhere as China's new "compelling, but contradictory," master discourse of disability. Here, disabled people are

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<sup>51</sup> For more discussion of China's new approach to disability, see Sarah Dauncey, "Three Days to Walk: A Personal Story of Life Writing and Disability Consciousness in China," *Disability & Society* 27:3 (2012): 311-323, particularly pp.312-314; also, Sarah Dauncey, "Whose Life is it Anyway? Disabled Life Stories in Post-reform China," in Marjorie Dryburgh and Sarah Dauncey, eds., *Writing Lives in China 1600-2010: Histories of the Elusive Self* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 182-205.

segregated into a distinct group that is defined by and respected for their bodily alterity, but simultaneously drawn back into the national whole as fully functioning members as they are rescued from that very same bodily alterity.<sup>52</sup> Many of the projects overseen by the China Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF), a quasi-ministry founded in 1988, have been founded upon these contradictory principles.<sup>53</sup> Kohrman discusses one such example of the way in which the CDPF took to actively promoting heteronormative marriage for disabled men in the mid-1990s following revelations from the first sample survey of disability in China (undertaken in 1987) that 45% of disabled men aged 30-44 fell into the category "never married" (in contrast to 4% of disabled women and 7% of non-disabled men).<sup>54</sup> There were, he suggests, a range of reasons behind this: the CDPF could be visibly seen to be supporting the general well-being of their constituents and their re-integration into "normal" society; it was hoped that marriage would diminish any potential financial or welfare service claims the men might have on the state if they were to remain single; and perhaps most interesting for the purposes of this study, it enabled the CDPF to meet the entrenched gender expectations of the patriarchal state by "affording male constituents access to women and [thus] ... affirmation of their masculinity."<sup>55</sup>

Kohrman's work in Beijing reveals much about the way in which men with physical impairments (most of whom were polio survivors and, therefore, experiencing varying levels

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<sup>52</sup> Dauncey, "A Face in the Crowd," 131.

<sup>53</sup> For an exploration of the way in which the CDPF guided and shaped this post-reform discourse, see Kohrman, *Bodies of Difference*.

<sup>54</sup> That only 4% of men and women across the general population never marry reveals just how normative marriage is in China. See Kohrman, *Bodies of Difference*, 180.

<sup>55</sup> Kohrman, *Bodies of Difference*, 180.

of mobility difficulties) struggled to meet societal expectations regarding the roles and attributes of “real men,” particularly in terms of marriage and work. According to one interviewee, a Mr Li (a pseudonym) from Beijing, his inability to find a marriage partner intensified his feelings of worthlessness:

The looking and talking wasn’t so bad when I was young. It didn’t happen so often and I barely noticed. It became really bad though when I tried to marry. Growing up, I saw all these people around me finding themselves or their children a partner (*dui xiang*) and marrying. This made them feel good and valuable. Naturally, my family hoped for me to marry as soon as possible. More than anything else, they thought it would make me feel better, make me feel valuable. But it hasn’t. Whenever I’ve tried to find someone, people start laughing and talking about how foolish my hopes are, and I end up feeling more and more like a worthless *que zi*.<sup>56</sup>

While being disabled – in his own words, a *quezi* 瘸子 (equivalent to the derogatory English “lame” or “cripple”) – in itself may have worked to limit marriage opportunities for physically disabled men like Mr Li, Kohrman’s analysis offers some useful nuance here. He suggests that we should also consider the way in which “competence” or *nengli* 能力 could factor into the equation. Traditionally, if you wanted to be viewed as “competent,” and therefore marriageable, you needed to be seen as mobile so you could put any skills you might have to good use and, thereby, earn a living:

To be a so-called real man (*nan zi han*) in the People’s Republic of China, one must not only move around outside the home by riding on everything from tractors to

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<sup>56</sup> Kohrman, “Grooming Que Zi,” 893.



trucks, motorcycles to cars, ships to trains, buses to airplanes, but also be in the position to control and operate such conveyances for others.<sup>57</sup>

“Competence,” achieved here through mobility outside the home and in the workplace, can therefore be seen to have attained much more significance for disabled men than disabled women due to the traditional gender stereotypes about appropriate roles and spheres for men and women. Such assumptions, however, also reveal how impairment types and geographic location might also intersect to play a role. In Beijing, Kohrman suggests, the very mobility of men with physical impairments (due, in part, to the fact they have access to mobility scooters) meant that they were often viewed as having more *nengli* than people with impairments falling within the other four Chinese state categories of impairment at that time (namely, “blind,” “deaf,” “mentally ill,” and “mentally retarded”), who might not have had the same opportunities for independent mobility. In the countryside, by contrast – where getting around was possibly more important due to the nature of agricultural work, but where roads were often inaccessible to scooters and other mobility aids – men with physical impairments might well have been viewed as the *least* capable (*gan bu liao huo* 干不了活).<sup>58</sup>

Disabled men, therefore, can be seen to have been responding on an individual level to traditional and contemporary conceptions of masculinity and disability, some of which are filtered directly down to them by the Chinese state through the various arms and organs of the CDPF. Their understanding of what disabled masculinities might be are assembled from a matrix of contradictory discourses that foreground normative gendered behaviors, but simultaneously deny them full access to those behaviors because of their non-normative

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<sup>57</sup> Kohrman, “Grooming Que Zi,” 894.

<sup>58</sup> Kohrman, “Grooming Que Zi,” 894.

bodies. Disabled men in China today are expected to live up to the ideals of the “real man” by overcoming their disability through mobility, competence or income generation and marriage, but are often thwarted by stereotyping, discrimination and policy. What is more, impairment type and geographical location may also play a significant role in the way in which disabled male identities are framed and experienced on a personal level.

### **Zhang Yuncheng becomes a “real man”**

To uncover more detail of the way in which a disabled male identity might be framed and negotiated in more recent times, we turn here to examine the writings of Zhang Yuncheng. In his debut memoir, *Three Days to Walk*, Yuncheng presents a thematic journey through his everyday life, thoughts and dreams after he finds national fame as a “model youth” because of his inspirational “triumph-over-tragedy” attitude and his charity work.<sup>59</sup> At the time of its publication, *Three Days to Walk* was something of a pioneering work. Although there had been several notable examples of disabled life writing published through the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>60</sup> this was the first memoir to be written by a young disabled man and, as such, offers us a unique and often intimate window into the way in which one writer experienced his early years of adulthood. The book itself is also visually arresting. It is illustrated with numerous black and white photographs of Yuncheng and his family in their home. Some of the images show Yuncheng taking on the role of carer for his brother Yunpeng 雲鵬, more commonly referred to in the book as Third Brother (*Sange* 三哥), who also has muscular dystrophy. Other images, by contrast, show a more vulnerable and passive existence – his condition leaves him

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<sup>59</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this memoir, see Dauncey, “Three Days to Walk.”

<sup>60</sup> For further discussion of other intimate histories of disability, see Dauncey, “Whose Life is it Anyway?”

dependent upon regular medical treatment (one image shows him hooked up to a drip) and, more often than not, housebound (another image shows him lying on the bed gazing out of the window dreaming, so the caption states, of the time he can travel to the famous Wudalianchi 五大連池 scenic park in his home province of Heilongjiang).

Yuncheng's muscular dystrophy is progressive and, we are told, life-limiting. In Yuncheng's own words, "the spectre of death" is never far away.<sup>61</sup> At the time of writing, he is living in what can only be described as straightened circumstances in rural Heilongjiang Province with his parents, his brother Yunpeng and another brother Yuncai 雲財, more commonly referred to as Second Brother (*Erge* 二哥). Throughout we see that Yuncheng is highly aware of the cultural expectations of a son. Having been taken out of school after only a short time due to increasingly regular periods of illness (he tells us how he ends up having to teach himself how to read and write),<sup>62</sup> his desire to gain a full education and, as time goes on, worthwhile employment is palpable:

I could not walk, but I still wanted to...work.

Every time I came to the dinner table, I was filled with burning shame: not only could I not contribute to my family or society, there was never an occasion where a meal was not laid out before me. I didn't want to be a parasite! I yearned to make a contribution to my family and society, no matter how small; I wanted to make someone else's life brighter.

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<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Zhang, *Three Days*, 63-69.

<sup>62</sup> Zhang, *Three Days*, 7-13. Exclusion for disabled children is still common in China's education system; see Sarah Dauncey, "Special and Inclusive Education," in W. John Morgan, Qing Gu, and Fengliang Li, eds., *A Handbook of Education in China* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2017), 290-313.

I once wrote to a work department and described how I was desperate to realize my own worth [*jiazhi* 價值] by doing something for others. To be honest, before writing to them I had already considered the fact that it was unlikely that any work unit would have a vacancy as there were so many out of work; and, even if they did, then there were so many fit and healthy people out there. Who would employ a disabled person like me over them? I just had to hope that there was someone out there who could understand that I didn't want to be a parasite or be known as a "good-for-nothing" [*feiren* 廢人].<sup>63</sup>

He desperately wants to fit into the "normal" work-based roles expected of his peers, but his limited education and lack of employment stifle this. Yet, his writing ultimately reveals his joy as comes to the realization that he can be valued by society for taking on roles and activities which *are* within his reach at this point in his life – he becomes an inspirational disabled role model for his charity work and for working towards his aim of being a professional writer, soon to be realized in the publication of his first memoir. "I can help people too!" exclaims the title of one of the chapters. Although he has yet to find regular paid employment, by actively giving back to society he feels that he has achieved a life that is recognized as having "value" in Chinese society. Personhood trumps traditional role-based success for Yuncheng at this point in his life.

The memoir's sequel, *Flying without Wings*, brings his story more up to date with a chronological retelling of the experiences of Yuncheng, Yunpeng, and Yuncai (who now takes

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<sup>63</sup> Zhang, *Three Days*, 56. Employment levels continue to be low for all disabled people, but particularly women; see Masayuki Kobayashi and Mori Soya, eds., *Poverty Reduction for the Disabled in China: Livelihood Analysis from the Second China National Sample Survey on Disability* (Chiba: Institute of Developing Economies–JETRO, 2009).

on the role of their primary carer), as the trio travel to Beijing in 2004 to seek medical treatment and new employment opportunities away from their rural roots. Having finished the previous memoir on something of a high note, the first few chapters come as a surprise since Yuncheng's focus returns almost immediately to what he describes as the "troublesome" nature of his and his brother's body. He describes in detail the various daily routines that appear to dominate their new life in the city. Here, for example, he watches Yuncai dress Yunpeng, the daily precursor to his own similar dressing ritual:

Second Brother [...] placed Third Brother's feet on his knees and opened up the end of the socks with both hands so he could put them on him. He then held Third Brother's ankles with his left hand, while he used his right hand to pull up the socks. The black socks were on but seemed a little loose. Second Brother fiddled with the leg end of the socks in an attempt to secure them – he didn't want the socks falling down once the trousers were on. But getting the trousers on was tricky because Third Brother's legs won't straighten and have no real strength in them. Once he had gotten Third Brother's legs a little way into the top, Second Brother put his hands up one trouser leg to grab his foot and pull it through. Having done the left leg, he moved on to the right one. Then it was time for the top half. This was even more difficult. Second Brother pushed Third Brother's arms into the sleeves and pulled the arms through. It was a sweatshirt so, once the arms were in, he put his left hand down under Third Brother's neck and raised his head. With his right hand, he then grasped the neck of the top and pulled it over his head. He quickly pulled the top down to avoid any possibility of smothering his brother. An adjustment here, a tug there, and the outfit was free of any creases – even a little one might rub against him. Lastly, there was the coat – a bright orange jacket. Getting this on

was not so problematic as it had a slippery inner lining. The sound of the zip indicated that Third Brother was now dressed!<sup>64</sup>

Their lack of physical strength and continual dependence upon their non-disabled brother is a constant source of anxiety and concern in this new environment. How the two disabled brothers would even survive, let alone become independent and thrive, without Yuncai to attend to their every need, is a question Yuncheng poses to himself on a regular basis.

The lack of contact with the outside world equally troubles him. A large part of the first memoir detailed the way in which he consciously reached out beyond the four walls of his home through letter writing and, eventually, an active online epistolary life. In Beijing, by contrast, the initial lack of computer and only rare visits out of their accommodation sees Yuncheng feeling increasingly constrained, both physically and mentally:

Without a computer, I couldn't write. What else could I do? Cook? Sweep? Wash clothes? It seemed that there was nothing else I could do. I'd gone through every possibility and come up empty-handed. It was then that I felt there really was very little point to my existence. It was so pointless, I was ashamed. Here I was, living in this world, literally unable to find anything I could do! The sadness of it all; I was lost and couldn't see a way forward. Every day, we would eat, sleep, go to the toilet, sleep, eat, go to the toilet. Life had become nothing more than this basic routine.<sup>65</sup>

The nature of Zhang Yuncheng's physical impairment means that the prospect of providing for his parents financially, a major goal articulated in the first memoir and something that is

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<sup>64</sup> Zhang, *Flying*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Zhang, *Flying*, 9.

reiterated regularly in the second book, continues to be a remote prospect as the brothers find it impossible to find suitable work to support themselves.

For Yuncheng and Yunpeng, just getting out of their rented basement rooms is a struggle, not to mention the hostility, discrimination and objectification they face on a daily basis when they are out and about.<sup>66</sup> On one occasion, Yuncheng is left with an almost unspeakable sense of discomfort when a taxi driver shouts out to some builders to let their car through: “Wait a minute, I’ve a pair of paralytics (*tanzi* 瘫子) in the back!” Yuncheng explains his shock and dismay at hearing this:

“Paralytic” – that word! It immediately makes me feel labelled as different, cast out from this world. It separates me and my brother out from able-bodied people. The contrast between us and them appears to be just so clear-cut. I immediately become more “aware” of my wheelchair and my troublesome body. The time when I used to be bothered by such things has long gone; I am well used to it by now. On this occasion, however, the good mood I normally try to cultivate is momentarily disrupted. All of a sudden, I feel inferior and the situation becomes awkward. I am embarrassed for the driver, but he appears oblivious. The word “paralytic” just sounds so dreadful! In an instant, my impression of the driver takes a nosedive! I even take a dislike to his bearded face...<sup>67</sup>

On another occasion, Yuncheng describes his reaction to the news that their new landlord wants them out of the property within only a few days of moving in. He writes of the way the

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<sup>66</sup> Many thanks to Giorgio Strafella for pointing out the irony that despite the brothers’ move to the city and ostensibly “civilization,” discrimination (caused by both a lack of awareness, as well as targeted and conscious behavior) continued.

<sup>67</sup> Zhang, *Flying*, 3.

landlord looked down on them (*qingshi* 輕視) and treated them with contempt (*mieshi* 蔑視): “He said that this wasn’t a welfare home and that we should get out as soon as possible!”<sup>68</sup> Such encounters understandably only serve to reinforce his feelings of worthlessness and uselessness. Ironically, Yuncheng’s rural life appears to have offered *more* opportunities for interaction beyond the four walls of home through the window of a computer, than urban life in Beijing at the start. This conflicts with Kohrman’s findings from the late 1990s, which suggested that, while mobility was a key factor in determining the extent to which a disabled man could meet the expectations of masculinity generally, *physical* mobility was key to meeting those expectations in the countryside. Here, by contrast, we have evidence of the way in which computerization and the internet may have already started to change the way in which disabled men may view themselves and be viewed by others around them. Yuncheng’s “virtual mobility” in the countryside, a place where one might have expected him to be least “capable,” enabled him to demonstrate “competence” and “value.” In the city, confined to a basement flat and without access to the internet, his sense of self-worth is diminished to the extent that he questions the very validity of his existence.

With eventual access to a computer, Yuncheng gets the opportunity to set up his own online trading business and, on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006, he celebrates his first sale. At this point, he reflects at length upon what this milestone means to him as a disabled young man:

Was this not the very thing I had been waiting for all these years? From the start when I was scouring heaven and earth for a publisher, to this moment and the opening of my own online business, I have never stopped trying and have constantly worked hard to achieve my dreams. I have always thought that being financially independent is one of the most important things in life and it is

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<sup>68</sup> Zhang, *Flying*, 34.



particularly the case given my physical condition. Without financial independence, I could never gain real independence, let alone any respect. Even if someone had shown me some respect, it wouldn't have meant a thing.<sup>69</sup>

Yuncheng's understanding of a successful life here appears to be founded on a large extent upon his ability to be financially independent – for this, in turn, leads to a sense of real independence and social respectability. His ability to earn money to support his family through his newfound online mobility means that he can be publicly recognized, fêted even, as an inspirational entrepreneur and, more importantly, as a socially responsible member of the community. These are achievements that enable him to meet some of the gendered expectations of his family and society at large.<sup>70</sup>

It is only towards the end of the book, however, that we hear of another major personal and social milestone – Yuncheng has fallen in love. The course of the relationship is recounted within a single chapter – it is dedicated to “Her” and subtitled “In honour of a beautiful love of a lifetime” (*Ta: Jinian yi sheng yi ci de meihao aiqing* 她: 紀念一生一次的美好愛情). Unlike the rest of the book, the narrative in this chapter is addressed directly to the recipient of his affections and this makes it feel rather unusual. Here, Yuncheng recalls the time they first met and the way in which his feelings for “her” developed and he suggests that the feelings were reciprocated. Unfortunately, the relationship comes to a rather sudden end and he is left bereft, so bereft in fact that he weeps endlessly for several pages. “Without me

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<sup>69</sup> Zhang, *Flying*, 83.

<sup>70</sup> On the back of his literary and business successes, Yuncheng has received numerous national and international awards. A list of his many accolades and achievements can be found at <http://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%BC%A0%E4%BA%91%E6%88%90/8802608> (last accessed 22 June 2016).

you would be happier,” he cries. “I couldn’t give you anything!”<sup>71</sup> But this is not the first time he considers the way in which his disability has directly affected their relationship. Recounting the first time she kisses him, he writes:

I had fallen head over heels for you, but I often questioned it all. I am someone with a serious medical condition, but you were able-bodied, pretty, caring, good-hearted; you had a good job. I thought many times about the fact that being with me would cause you trouble. I had even said to you: “There is so little I can give to you. I can’t even raise my own hand. I can’t even hold you.” But you said: “As far as I am concerned, you will always be able-bodied, a real man who is big and strong (*ding tian li di de nanzihan* 頂天立地的男子漢). You stand taller than many men able to stand. You are the hottest guy in the world!”<sup>72</sup>

The fact that he specifically references the term *nanzihan* when recalling the words of his love interest appears to be the validation for which he has been searching – he is a “real man,” “big and strong,” and sexually attractive to the opposite sex. Although his weepy romanticism around the relationship breakup tempers this image somewhat – indeed, such behavior appears more reminiscent of Louie’s *caizi* than the sexually promiscuous, social-climbing *nanzihan* of Uretsky’s research – it is clear that this is another significant milestone for Yuncheng. With a new way to support himself and his family, a busy social life as a model citizen, and his first romantic experience under his belt, he no longer feels useless or dependent; he is no longer confined and isolated; he no longer feels asexual or pitiable; he has been recognized as “appropriately” masculine; he is a “real man.”

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<sup>71</sup> Zhang, *Flying*, 162.

<sup>72</sup> Zhang, *Flying*, 158.

## **Conclusions**

Stereotypes of disability and gender intersect to “constitute a deep matrix of gendered disability in every culture, developed within specific historical contexts, and affecting those contexts over time.”<sup>73</sup> Yet, one key element that appears common to many discourses of disability, regardless of context or time, is that disabled people should strive to be as “normal” as possible, and it is this “discourse of normalcy” that provides the horizon of possibilities (and more often, limitations) through which an individual’s gendered behaviors are formed and enacted.<sup>74</sup> For men in many societies around the world (particularly those that favour males, maleness, or masculinity), this has been shown to result in the “dilemma of disabled masculinity.” In such societies, the stigma of disability essentially creates an environment that destabilizes any patriarchal dividend and, as a consequence, disabled men often find themselves forced into behaviors that rely upon, reformulate, and/or reject hegemonic ideals of both ableism *and* masculinity. In this regard, the persistence of China’s patriarchal traditions and broader “crisis of masculinity,” combined with a continuing emphasis on active and purposeful social and economic participation in a society that has historically devalued the non-normative body, reveal a maelstrom of contradictory pressures that strongly suggest that such tensions exist in China too. It is only when we come to examine the personal

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<sup>73</sup> Meekosha, “Gender, International,” 767.

<sup>74</sup> For the “discourse of normalcy,” see Lennard J. Davis, “Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel and the Invention of the Normal Body in the Nineteenth Century,” in Lennard J. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 3-16. For the link between “normalcy” and the “personal tragedy theory,” see Michael Oliver and Colin Barnes, *The New Politics of Disablement* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 91.

experiences of Zhang Yuncheng, however, that we see how one individual experiences these tensions as he navigates the spaces and ruptures formed at the intersection of disability, masculinity, and the cultural context that surrounds him.

Unlike Hird and Uretsky's participants, Zhang Yuncheng does not write openly of his ideas of male qualities, so it is difficult to know precisely the assumptions upon which his identity as a disabled man is based, and the extent to which his appropriation of various male identities is deliberate. However, close reading of his memoir does reveal that Yuncheng is in no doubt about the "male" roles and responsibilities expected of him from his family and society more broadly and relies upon them heavily as he constructs his own identity. He is untiring in his attempts to improve his education, find worthwhile employment, become independent, and support his family. Yet, he also recognizes that his physical condition means that he is unlikely to meet some of these expectations any time soon and so, at times, he is forced to reformulate his understanding of masculinity to find meaning to his life. Shifting emphasis to his charity work and model citizen status, for example, enables him to create a socially valued identity based on personhood rather than role-based success. His joy, however, when he eventually establishes his own e-business and has a significant romantic experience, both of which offer him the opportunity to meet more stereotypical expectations of manhood, is truly palpable.

We also get an extraordinary sense of the fact that his sense of self rests heavily on others' validation or rejection. In the eyes of his love interest, we see him transformed into a *nanzihan*, a "real man" who is mobile (albeit virtually), financially independent, a prominent member of the community, and sexually attractive to the opposite sex. And this overall sense of "manhood attained" is reinforced further by the various prefaces to *Flying* composed by notables of the business, entertainment and charity world, all of whom make specific

comment on his masculine qualities – he is a “warrior” (*yongshi* 勇士), a “superman” (*qiangzhe* 強者), a veritable Chinese hero. Yet, at the same time, they also note his gentility and Confucian refinement (*wenwen ruya* 溫文儒雅), his intelligence (*zhihui* 智慧) and strength of character (*jianqiang* 堅強), qualities that speak more to the traditional *junzi* and *caizi* end of the spectrum than the rougher *haohan* qualities mentioned above. He is described as an “exemplar” (*dianfan* 典范) for all and yet, notably and paradoxically, “different to normal people” (*yi yu chang ren* 異與常人) because of his disability. And so, while his qualities are frequently mapped favourably against manly criteria by others (and he is clearly appreciative of such assessments), his non-normative body is often seen as ultimately denying him the possibility of meeting many of those masculine expectations and ideals in their entirety.

While Hird’s Chinese white-collar *junzi* and Uretsky’s social-climbing *nanzihan* are recreating their own masculinities based on assemblages of both Chinese and Western notions of manhood, Zhang Yuncheng can also be seen to be reformulating his own masculinity based on a confluence of equally diverse assumptions. What is different, however, is that he has the added complexity of negotiating his own and broader society’s dynamic, and often contradictory, understandings of normalcy and disability at the same time. The examination of a personal narrative like his must inevitably acknowledge that one man’s experiences are not necessarily those of all disabled young men.<sup>75</sup> It is also clear that more investigation is required if we are to understand more deeply the complexities of the way in

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<sup>75</sup> As Tom Shakespeare puts it, not only do disabled men “differ from one another, [...] individual disabled men receive and embody contradictory and confusing messages” about masculinity. See Tom Shakespeare, “The Sexual Politics of Disabled Masculinity,” *Sexuality and Disability* 17 (1999): 53–64, see p.60.

which social, cultural, and economic “capital” may impact upon the internalization of both imported and indigenous notions of masculinity. However, I would argue that by drawing on local understandings of the way in which both disabled and masculine identities are created and experienced, and setting them against more universalist assumptions in the way that I have done here, we are able to create a more substantial and robust framework for further exploration of the ways in which gender features in the socio-cultural discourse of disability and the way in which it impacts upon the lives and experiences of individual disabled men and women, both in China and elsewhere.